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FM AMEMBASSY BISHKEK

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1542

INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE

RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2762

RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH 0031

RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH 0017

RUEKJCS/OSD WASHDC

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 1125

RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO BRUSSELS BE

RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 3153

RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2539

RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS

RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORP

RUMICEA/USCENTCOM INTEL CEN MACDILL AFB FL

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BISHKEK 001185

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/26/2018

TAGS: PGOV PREL ECON KG

SUBJECT: ETHNIC TENSIONS AND GROWING FUNDAMENTALISM IN
JALALABAD, KYRGYZSTAN

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Classified By: Classified By: Amb. Tatiana C. Gfoeller, Reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: A trip by EmbOff to the southern Kyrgyz city of Jalalabad, the third largest in the country, to promote the U.S. elections shed light on several worrying issues. An eager crowd of students gathered at Jalalabad State University's (JSU) American Center for an Embassy-hosted election discussion on November 5, while the university leadership told of deteriorating conditions at the school. The director of the Jalalabad Media Support Center described a restrictive media environment, official corruption, tensions between ethnic groups, and growing support for Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT). The city mayor reported guarded optimism about the winter, but concern over HT, continuing electricity shortages and emigration. A visit to the Friendship of Peoples University, owned by a private ethnic Uzbek businessmen, showed the wealth of the Uzbek community and a school that is teaching Sharia law. END SUMMARY.

CORRUPTION IN A KYRGYZ UNIVERSITY? SHOCKING.

¶2. (C) Approximately 50 students enthusiastically participated in an Embassy-hosted election discussion at JSU. Interestingly, two State Committee on National Security (GKNB) agents also visited the University's Vice-Rector before the event to warn against discussing Kyrgyz politics. (Comment: This is not the first time that the GKNB's Jalalabad branch has warned local officials about discussing politically sensitive topics at Public Affairs Section events. End Comment.) In a separate meeting, university vice-rectors expressed a strong desire to learn from American success in higher education amid worsening educational standards in Kyrgyzstan. They also reported a high demand for the English language, which about 8,000 students now study, in contrast to the declining interest in Arabic (now 20 students) in recent years. Sadly, JSU reinforced its

reputation for corruption when the American Corner staff submitted forged receipts to us for the election event expenses.

A FRIENDSHIP OF PEOPLES, UNDER SHARIA LAW

¶3. (C) The private Friendship of Peoples University, founded by businessman and former member of Parliament Kadyrjan Batyrov, stands in gleaming contrast to the dilapidated infrastructure of JSU. Batyrov is a leader of the ethnic Uzbek community in Kyrgyzstan's south, an area where inter-ethnic relations are a sensitive subject for the Kyrgyz government. The University opened in 1999 and currently enrolls 1,500 students, many ethnically Uzbek. Although one teacher claimed that Batyrov is not very religious himself, the university has opened a Faculty of Sharia law in cooperation with the Islamic University in Medina, Saudi Arabia. It also has prayer rooms for students, a rare sight in the largely secular world of Kyrgyz education. The ethnic Uzbek teacher said that Kyrgyz and Uzbek students get along for the most part, but the broader Uzbek community is tired of not having media sources in the Uzbek language.

MEDIA CENTER: PRESS AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS

¶4. (C) The director of the Jalalabad Media Resource Center, Shuhrat Aitiev, described a decline in media freedom based on fear of government retribution. The center is financed in part by an Embassy Democracy Commission grant and other Western donor support. Aitiev said that journalists choose not to write about the corruption of the Bakiyev

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administration and family, though they know about it personally given Bakiyev's roots in the Jalalabad region. By contrast, they felt free to write critically of the administration of former President Akayev. He cited the recent example of a local journalist who was fired after calls to his paper by the mayor and the GKNB for reporting a trash scandal with the mayor. More broadly, he noted the dominance of Russian television stations and newspapers in southern Kyrgyzstan, and the corresponding popularity of Russia and Vladimir Putin.

¶5. (C) Aitiev also reported continuing tensions between ethnic Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the South, which the media does not report on. He said the tensions are generally below the surface, though a fight recently occurred in Jalalabad with about 50 of each ethnic group per side. Aitiev believes the Uzbek community is tolerant of the disproportion of ethnic Kyrgyz in political power, but is becoming frustrated with the paucity of mass media and education in the Uzbek language. He also argued that Islam is growing in popularity: many new mosques have been built, and they overflow with worshippers. He worries about extremism, saying that HT is getting bolder in its public outreach, including holding a lottery during Ramadan. He thinks a confrontation between HT and the authorities could occur, though is more likely outside of the city center.

MAYOR: "RADICAL ISLAM IS A BIG PROBLEM"

¶6. (C) City mayor Tilek Akambaev claimed that Jalalabad will endure the coming winter between official coal purchases, private preparations of citizens, and the option of going into debt to buy gas from Uzbekistan. He admitted that electricity shortages have hurt the local economy, though there will still be year-to-year growth thanks to an increase in oil production. Akambaev is also worried by the severe shortage of water in the region and poor infrastructure that leaks what water they do have. The city has seen mixed effects of huge emigration to Russia: the remittances flowing back help families survive and boost retail trade,

but there are real shortages of qualified workers.

17. (C) Akambaev is also worried about the growth of radical Islam. He hopes a tougher new law on religion will help crack down on HT, Christian missionaries and others who have "too many rights." Akambaev claimed HT is growing thanks to money from Saudi Arabia that allows it to expand its outreach, especially to young people in schools. In the future, the mayor recommended working with the governor: "I take orders from him, since we have an Oriental ("vostochniy") mentality here in the South -- everything is top down."

COMMENT:

18. (C) Jalalabad is a city with many problems, though the government seems more than aware of them. Emigration has eased unemployment concerns and the city's multiple bazaars are certainly expanding. Local officials tend to view ethnic tensions and religious issues in terms of potential security threats, and they offer no ideas for resolving these issues beyond expanding government control.

GFOELLER